

A Short History of Holbeach St Marks

By Richard Crowhurst

It may be slightly odd talking about history in a village that has only existed for 135 years, but Holbeach St Marks is more than just a village. It's also a microcosm of past, present and future life on Holbeach Marsh. In the depths of winter, particularly when there's a frost, or a thick sea mist has rolled in from The Wash, it can seem that St Marks, while not quite the middle of nowhere, is not far away. The development of the village has echoed wider changes to south Lincolnshire's rural environment while keeping its own paradoxical character. It continues to do so in the twenty-first century.

Holbeach St Marks can claim to be the only true village which on Holbeach Marsh. Its sister, Holbeach St Matthew, is little more than a hamlet: an isolated church serving a collection of farms and cottages. The other villages north of Holbeach lie too close to the A17, within older sea defences, to be considered truly villages of the marsh.

The marshes and mudflats were an important resource long before residential settlement. In Iron Age times, when the coastline was much further inland, salt collecting was an important industry. The mounds and 'hills' lying north of Holbeach Bank, a couple of miles away, remain as evidence of this. The Saxons built the first large-scale sea defences around The Wash and their Sea Bank still survives in places today. The construction of these earthworks created ideal grazing conditions on the seaward side. This was used in the medieval period: the first agricultural use of the marshes. As reclamation continued, with the construction of ditches, banks and sluices in the thirteenth century, the marshes beyond the new coastline remained brackish and formidable. They stretched for three miles in the early seventeenth century, and it was at this time that the first agricultural dwellings prospered. Many of today's farms lie along the route of one of the old sea banks and appear to have been well established by the end of the sixteenth century, when they were able to take advantage of newly drained land. The seventeenth century saw the start of large-scale land reclamation around The Wash as Dutch expertise was brought in to drain the mudflats and creeks for fertile arable farmland. The standard pattern of farming (which is still seen today) was to graze stock on the fertile grass beyond the bank and use the protected, better drained soil inland for crop production. Today the

'silt' soils in this area are amongst the most productive and sort after farmland in the country.

There was no official village before the church, from which it takes its name, was built. By the middle of the seventeenth century a small but significant network of farms and cottages existed across the marshes. The inhabitants of these were faced with a journey of up to eight miles to the nearest church in Holbeach. They requested the construction of a nearer place of worship, an idea that was supported by the Rev. Arthur Brook, vicar of Holbeach. The Church Commissioners were approached in August 1866 and they endowed two churches (St Mark's and St Matthew's) to serve the marsh under a single vicar.

The Crown donated half an acre of land for St Mark's church and another acre alongside for the vicarage. Building started in the summer of 1868 and on 6th January 1869 the Bishop of Lincoln, Dr Jackson, was able to consecrate the new church. This was designed by renowned ecclesiastical architect Ewan Christian. In his career Christian designed over forty churches, including those nearby at Holbeach St Matthew and Dawsmere. He also oversaw construction of the chancel arch at Horncastle and the restoration of the church at Kirton-in-Lindsey. Christian is most famous for the restoration of Carlisle Cathedral and his designs for the National Portrait Gallery. In later life, aged 73, he was awarded a gold medal by the Royal Institute of British Architects and became its president the following year.



The church

The first vicar of St Marks was the Rev. J. H. Jowitt, who resided in the vicarage from the beginning. By 1870 he had organised the building of a school in the village that was growing up on the northern side of the road (a drainage ditch to the south has restricted development opposite the church to this day). Rev. Grant MacDonald – a descendant of Bonnie Prince Charlie's infamous helper, Flora –

succeeded Jowitt in April 1879. Rev. MacDonald left many written documents and records about the church and its life and built a second school on the marsh, this time at Holbeach St Matthew.

Many of the early buildings in the village still stand today, constructed at the same time as the school and church: End Cottage, next to the school, is dated 1870, Marsh Villa and the terrace at White City demonstrate another forty years of building. As the new century dawned the village was moving steadily east and west along the road. This expansion was in contrast to the situation in other rural parishes where there was a general exodus of workers to towns and cities. This eventually resulted in the Small Holdings Act in 1907, designed to help stem the tide of people.

By the 1930s village expansion was accelerating. St Marks was now home to a thriving community supporting the outlying farms and cottages. A map of the village in 1933 shows that the village supported a Blacksmith, Wheelwright, Basket-maker (who lives on in the name of the cottage), two inns (The New Inn remains, The Wheatsheaf has since disappeared), two shops, a post office and chapel. The chapel and two houses next door were unique in lying south of the road. They were reached by crossing the dyke on a short bridge. Today the ditch has been re-routed and skirts around them. New council houses were also constructed in what is now Lincoln Lane, and a 'Crown Colony' was built further south on Holbeach (Middle Marsh) Road. These were equipped with outbuildings designed as stables, reflecting the aims of the Small Holdings Act.



The New Inn remains today.

The vicar from 1927 was Rev C. V. Browne-Wilkinson, whose memory lives on in the commemorative window in the church and in Browne-Wilkinson Walk, a collection of affordable bungalows built opposite the school by Lincolnshire Rural Housing Association in 1991. This affordable housing is typical of the thriving community still supported by the village. In 1996 a modern village hall was built alongside the playing field and sees regular use for a variety of community events.



The Village Hall

Recent new housing continues to attract new residents to the village. While many people now commute to their work, food production remains the biggest local source of employment, both on local arable farms and at Geest's Holbeach factory in Sluice Road. At times the village seems like an enigma. At the forefront of rural community development: it has its own IT centre alongside the village hall, yet is too remote to be considered for broadband internet access. It's these paradoxes that make the village so interesting.